News from Ed Markey

United States Congress **Massachusetts Seventh District**

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MARKEY TO U.S. CUSTOMS: DID RADIATION DETECTORS MALFUNCTION?

Lawmaker questions why equipment failed to detect leaky overseas shipment

Washington, DC: Representative Edward J. Markey (D-MA), a senior Member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee today released a letter to U.S. Customs asking Customs why it believed that a FedEx shipment of radioactive materials that was shipped from Paris to Louisiana did not begin to leak until after it arrived in the U.S., in light of a French Nuclear Safety Agency press release indicating that FedEx personnel in France had been exposed to high levels of radiation.

"U.S. Customs radiation detectors must have either malfunctioned or not been used properly," said Rep. Markey. "Clearly, Customs needs to do a better job at detecting radioactive materials that are being shipped into this country. Otherwise, what can stop Al Qaeda from using FedEx or UPS to ship radioactive materials to the U.S. for use in future attacks?"

In late December, FedEx shipped a 300 pound package containing 9400 curies of radioactive iridium-192 from Paris to the Source Production and Equipment Company in St. Rose, Louisiana. The package was reportedly emitting so much radiation by the time it was delivered that an individual exposed to it could have developed symptoms of radiation poisoning within several hours. For some reason, the radiation leak went undetected by officials at both U.S. Customs and FedEx. On January 16, 2002, Rep. Markey sent a letter to U.S. Customs requesting information related to this shipment. U.S. Customs responded to that letter on April 29, 2002, stating that: 1) U.S. Customs had determined that an additional 4,300 Personal Radiation Detectors (PRDs) are needed for inspectors and other Customs officials, 2) that Customs inspectors with these "highly sensitive" PRDs who were located in the vicinity of the leaking Fedex package were not alerted by the PRDs to the presence of any radiation and that therefore 3) "this suggests that damage to the packaging occurred during the transport to New Orleans [i.e. after it had already passed through U.S. Customs], and that this damage caused radiation leakage."

However, a May 2, 2002 press release issued by the French Nuclear Safety Agency (see http://www.asn.gouv.fr/data/information/17_2002_cdp.asp) indicates that medical examinations of FedEx agents in France showed that the package was already leaking when it was sent to Roissy airport, and that these individuals had been exposed to about 15 millisieverts of radiation. According to the release, the maximum allowable dose for a member of the public is 1 millisievert per year, and the maximum allowable dose for a nuclear industry worker is 20 millisieverts per year. The release went on to say that some of the stoppers of the tubes containing the radioactive sources had been unscrewed, and the sources fell out of the tubes, which was why the package was leaking.

The finding that the package was leaking before it left France appears to be in direct conflict with the U.S. Customs conclusion that the package must have started to leak after arriving in the U.S. Rep. Markey's letter to Customs asks:

- When U.S. Customs became aware that the package had in fact been leaking prior to its departure from France.
- Whether radiation detectors used by U.S. Customs malfunctioned, whether they are currently operational, and whether medical examinations have been performed on inspectors who had been in the vicinity of the package.
- Whether it is U.S. Customs policy to take steps to ensure that all packages entering the U.S., whether they are labeled radioactive or not, will be screened for radiation in the future, and how this will be accomplished.

Rep. Markey concluded, "Understanding what happened with this shipment is important if we are going to be able to create a system that is effectively in detecting shipments of radioactive materials that terrorists could use to make a radiological 'dirty bomb.'"

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